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"History Repeating Itself."

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A DISCOURSE,

BY

REV. CHARLES STANLEY LESTER,

RECTOR ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH,

HYDE PARK,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

HARVEST HOME FESTIVAL,

*5th October, 1879.*

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PRINTED BY REQUEST.



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*And all countries came into Egypt to Joseph, for to buy corn.—*  
GENESIS xli: 57.

History is repeating itself upon a grander scale, and the old old story of corn in Egypt, whose tragedy and romance interested us so greatly when we were children, is being lived over again upon the broad arena of the wide, wide world.

Our modern romance is very like the old one, only that the little details of a family story have become the grand features of a nation's life. In place of Egypt, we have a continent; instead of a single Joseph, a multitude of younger sons; of men hated and persecuted for conscience sake, of men sent into exile by the tyranny of their elder brethren.

Instead of a few short years in a single life, we have two centuries and more, before the romance of the history begins, and all Europe awakes to the fact that the children's children of those who went out from her in poverty and sorrow, are holding the storehouses of the food of the world. This is certainly romantic history, and all the more romantic because it is so strangely true. When generations yet to come, shall read the history of the wonderful nineteenth century, the year 1879 will stand out in bold relief upon its pages as the great year of the turning of the tide—the year in which a great young nation, for centuries dependent on its mother-world, reached its majority and found itself suddenly in position to dictate the cost of living to its aged parent across the sea.

*What use will it make of its sudden prosperity and power?*

Will it deal justly and mercifully with men? What influences will go out with its wheat, lumber and pork? What will it do under its sudden rain of gold? These are the questions that we cannot help asking, while we praise God for the great harvest of the year 1879.

For however bare and hard and material the business of the world may seem, we cannot separate spiritual from material things ; we cannot divorce transactions from their influences, but must regard the commerce of the world as a great magnetic fluid, which is affecting the souls of men for good or evil.

The little camel train, which wound its slow, weary length across the desert, to bring home its modicum of corn, has become a great river, majestic in its strength, gathering its volume from the thousand quick arteries of a nation's life, and pouring into the mighty ocean, to spread throughout the world the products and manufactures, the methods and the faiths of a great nation.

When we see a train go by, with its heavy load of freight, there are things going with that train not seen, things which do not appear in the invoice, and yet they are things which affect the souls of men forever. And as each car load reaches its journey's end, these unseen things expend their subtle force to make or mar the fortunes of the kingdom of Heaven.

There is a little strengthening of some one's faith in the things that abide forever, or one more shock to make men distrust our human kind.

We cannot help seeing, therefore, how dependent the world is for its growth in goodness, upon the faiths of men, in the great centres of commercial life. The things which have influenced men for good or evil have always radiated from great centres, and the names of historic cities mean for us a thousand things more than the mere localities they represent. When we speak of Jerusalem, or Athens, Rome, or Paris, we scarcely think of places at all, but of the influences which have gone out from them to make the history of the world.

These four names alone seem to us more like synonyms or symbols for religion, art, law and vanity.

It has taken centuries to associate certain influences with great historic names, but what our modern cities lack in the prestige of time, they more than make good by the rapidity of communication and the larger circle through which their influences extend.

When a city has grown old, its influence is a past settled fact of history, but so long as it is young, it may make the influence what it will.

There seems to be a responsibility then which has fallen upon the shoulders of business men in the great cities of this country, such has never been laid upon any men since the world began.

It is not alone the markets of the world that they are to control, the prices of the necessities of life that they are to regulate, but the faiths of men that they are to prescribe and the religion of the future that they are to formulate.

We often talk about the farming population as constituting the backbone of a country. But the country copies the cities and follows in their wake. Its effect is not active influence, but dead weight.

On the other hand, the original thinkers, the prophets of a land are few. It is the business man, those who live in the hottest of the strife, where the motives of life are generated, who digest thought and transmute it into power.

Was ever an opportunity, then, like the present, to convert the world, was ever a centre of influence more important for the faiths and destinies of man than this great city of Chicago? It is the Egypt of a new era. All countries are flocking to it, to buy corn, all roads lead to it, as once to Rome, and North and South and East and West, across the continent and beyond the sea, must go out from this focus of material things a tremendous influence upon the morality and religion of the world.

It is not in material prosperity alone that this country has attained its majority. It has acquired, also, the power of independent thought. The old problems of mankind are to be thought over again, and their new solutions may become the inspirations of a better life throughout the world.

When we were young, as a nation, we imported our clothes, our manners, our philosophy and religion from Europe, but out of the strange amalgam of nationalities and traditions, of customs and creeds, which has been gathering and seething in this country,

there is slowly coming forth a distinctive race, which will make or mar the world's development, which will either deify material things and make a fetish of prosperity, or else take a noble stride forward in the evolution of a higher life, and out of the buried kernels of Christian truth develop a grand simplicity of faith, which shall become an abiding power in the daily lives of men.

We sometimes deplore the fact that we are an irreverent nation, that we have little respect for persons or dignity, for places or traditions, and yet this very irreverence is one of the signs of the rude shock which has freed us from the thralldom of the past.

We stand in no awe of precedents. Instead of following established customs, we are making new ones for ourselves. Instead of bowing to authority in church or state, we, the people of a great nation, are the authority, and the respect once paid to principalities and powers is turned into the individual consciousness of being absolutely free. This personal freedom is a grand advance in the evolution of the race, a step upwards for millions of human beings towards the absoluteness of Almighty God.

And yet it may be a dangerous step. Unless the fulness of time be come, when men are able to grasp the rudder of their own lives and guide them by the compass of lawful destiny, there may be war in Heaven and greater anarchy in a nation's life than under the old clumsy methods by which the powers of church and state curbed the turbulence of men.

There must be law and order, there must be restraints and control, and if these be not imposed by powers without, they must be the development of conscience in each individual soul, and the eyes of the whole world are turned upon this country to see it working at the great problem of self-control, to see whether the time has yet come, when a great nation glorying in the strength of its independent manhood, can be a law unto itself, or whether yielding to the torrents of temptations which assail its youthful life, it is to fall from its ambitious height and be engulfed in political, financial and moral ruin.

This present year of a new prosperity is like the dawning of a

new life after a long racking of pain and a weary prostration from disease. Like a patient returning to consciousness after long weeks of sickness, we look back and remember that we had a long and dreadful war, whose convulsions threatened to tear the nation limb from limb, and we can recall the visions of our aged relatives beyond the sea, sitting by the bedside and feeling the nation's pulse, waiting to see the breath go out, that each might write a letter in the simple epitaph—"America is dead."

But America did not die. Young nations do not die so easily ; but throwing off the dread attack, she was left sore and weak, exposed to all the maladies which float in the pestilential atmosphere of war. The measles of ring-frauds broke out in a dreadful rash all over the land. The yellow fever of corruption attacked her vitals in local boards, in legislatures, in the capital itself. The high fever of fictitious values threw her into the wild delirium of speculation. And then came the sudden collapse of her over-strained energies, the dead surplus of production, the stagnation of trade, the paralysis of commerce and the question whether the nation's sufferings had not left her a hopeless, shattered wreck. But slowly and surely she has been nursing herself back to life, saving her strength, recruiting her energies, throwing off her encumbrances and biding her time, until now she finds herself ready to begin again the real work and warfare of life, in a time like the grand days of Solomon, when "silver is accounted as nothing, by reason of the plentifulness of gold."

Would that she might adopt a new motto and blazon it in her halls of congress, and write it large in her boards of trade, and print it on her commercial note, and sink it deep in each man's heart—"Go and sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee."

And how shall we, as a nation, be saved from our sins ? By faith only ! Not the old interpretation of this historic phrase, by which men thought that a certain theological belief would enable them to reap what they had not sown, but the actual belief by business men that certain things are better worth living for than certain other things, that there is a higher law than the civil code

or selfish policy, and that the first and noblest duty of man is not to make money or to gratify himself, but to help in the evolution of the race.

We have this much in our favor to start with. By far the largest part of the business men have a most profound respect for integrity and patience, for perseverance and faithfulness. But what they do not realize, and what they ought to believe, is that these things are copies in some degree of the attributes of God, that the men who manifest these things are Godlike, and so are lights and leaders of the race in its grand development towards the perfection of its Father in Heaven. Men need to believe that these are not the evanescent virtues of a human life, but the things that abide forever and make the form and features of a character for eternity.

Men are greatly fascinated with the new philosophy of evolution, but under the hands of its apostles it bids them look backwards, not forwards. It draws its inspiration from monstrosities and dead bones and jelly fish, and the last link in its chain is the present human life. But Christianity adds another link, and bids us to forget those things that are behind, while we press forward towards the infinite heights that are yet before us in the evolution of mankind, bids us work for the incarnation into our human lives of the life of God, and for the transformation into flesh and blood of the things that are pure and honorable, and true, and of good report.

Here is a faith that is not dark and mysterious, a faith that carries with it inspiration and power, a faith that transforms the motives and ambitions of life, a faith that saves men from their sins by making them seek first, in all things, the glorious fulfillment of their human destiny.

This is the kind of faith which this country needs to-day; a faith by which men live, and not a faith flaunted before the world in the stock phrases of cant; a bright and glorious living power, which takes to itself form and feature in the business transactions of the business world, and makes the ledger, and the brokers' board,

the press, the telegraph and the mail its ministers to preach throughout the world its Gospel of righteousness and truth. It is the business men and not the clergy who are to preach this faith. They are to preach it not in words, in dogmas or in creeds, but in faithfulness to the noblest motives of the soul, faithfulness which makes sacraments of common things, and turns every transaction, whether small or great, into an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual power that goes out on its mission to purify and elevate and redeem the souls of men.

The influences of the clergy in the world to-day, compared with the influences of business men, seems to me like the little cloud which floats across the clear summer sky. Multitudes do not see it, other multitudes do not heed it, but all men know that the day is fine.

A clergyman drops his little pebbles into the quiet mill-pond before his cottage door, and the ripples dance for a moment in the sunshine of peace and friendliness, but the men who move the great levers of the machinery of trade are dropping ponderous stones into the ocean of humanity, and the ripples go rolling on in ever-widening circles, until they spend their force upon the shores of eternity.

*What a responsibility! What an inspiration!*

Ought not the men upon whom the ends of the world are come to feel themselves called of God and consecrated as the apostles of a new and living faith? Ought not the priests who minister at the altars of trade to be clothed with righteousness, and as the leaders in the war for a new emancipation of mankind, to put on the whole armor of God?

To-day is their grand opportunity, not only to profit by the revival of industry and trade, but to work nobly for the revival throughout this land of faith in the things that abide forever.

The responsibility and the opportunity increase with the importance of the centre from which influence goes out. Most notably, then, is this very city of Chicago the place for the preaching of a new Gospel, for the rallying to a new crusade, for laying again

the old foundation stones of righteousness and truth, made bright and clean from the clinging vines of bigotry and the old mosses of tradition. There are other cities in this land, older and more beautiful, with more culture and music, and art and wealth, but there is no place which is to-day exerting so great an influence upon the faiths and methods, the deeds and destinies of men, as the city of Chicago. Down in the region between Water Street and Jackson, between the river and the lake, is the great throbbing heart of a new life for the world, a heart that is sending its pulsations throughout this land, and across two oceans, making the future religion of America, and moulding the lives of men in France and Germany, in China and Japan.

Every one knows that the centre of population in this land must be the Mississippi Valley, and what the future millions of this valley shall believe, and live and do, depends upon the light that is shining from the great metropolis of the West.

The farmers and the little dealers down in Illinois and throughout the great Northwest, will be the kind of men that the merchants of Chicago make them. They will be honorable and faithful and true, they will believe in immortality and God, or they will be cunning and grasping, and tricky and contemptible and mean. And the reputation of Chicago's dealings will be known far and wide ; what she says will be a synonym for truth ; what she promises, a guarantee of fulfillment ; what she does, the outward, comely form of a faithful spirit ; or she will be known among the nations as a place where none but the wise and prudent dare come to trade.

She believes in herself. Would that she might realize her influence and power. Would that some one gifted with persuasive eloquence might take each of her merchants by the hand and bid him—"O, sir, I pray you believe in some of these eternal things, some of the truths which you do not touch, nor taste, nor see ; I pray you, live by this faith, and so help to kindle in Chicago the bright shining of a light that shall lighten the nations of the earth along the highway of life, towards the perfection of God."

But the overwhelming thought comes to us here to-day—What are we among so many? Five barley loaves and a few small fishes. Yet these once fed the multitude. It is the leaven that leaveneth the lump. It is the unseen springs which multiply into torrents of power. It is the single mountains which help to make the mountain chain, and no man who lives so near the center of the world's activities as you and I, can begin to measure the influence of a single life. Look you to yourselves, therefore, and not to your brethren. Look well to your own faith. Govern your own life thereby, and honestly believe that the little seeds of hidden things that you are planting day by day, are the seeds of righteousness and life for the city, the country and the world.

Joseph was but a single man sold into slavery, and yet by the faith and faithfulness of that one life, multitudes of lives were saved, and the current of the history of the world was changed.

Our opportunities are grander than his. It is not one country, or a few camel trains, but the whole wide world that is flocking hither to buy corn, and let every man, therefore, who glows with the inspiration of Chicago's gigantic trade, feel the noble inspiration of her influence, and look upon his own life as big with influence that is going out from him in a constant stream of power, to mould the destinies of this country and to formulate the religion of the world.



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